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## NOTES ON ROMAN ARTISTS OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

### IV.

#### THE CLOISTER OF THE LATERAN BASILICA.<sup>1</sup>

[PLATE XIV]

The main reason for writing this paper is the recent discovery of the date of the cloister of S. John Lateran in Rome. It is not a minute description, but merely a sketch, the main object of which is a brief comparative study of the Roman cloisters and a tentative grouping of them according to style, so as to bring into relief the importance of the Lateran cloister as the originator and propagator of a new style, and incidentally to call attention to some interesting Roman cloisters that are practically unknown.

The mediæval cloisters of Rome are numerous and some of them are unsurpassed in beauty. Two stand pre-eminent: the cloisters of S. John Lateran and of S. Paul outside the walls. They are as alike as twin sisters, and yet the carefully trained eye will perceive that the Lateran is slightly superior in artistic beauty, and the historical critic may conclude that it is also a trifle earlier in date. Both belong to the first half of the thirteenth century, when the Roman school had reached the summit of its artistic glory, and are works of exquisite taste, symmetrical proportions, beautiful finish, and inexhaustible fertility of detail.

Reference to PLATE XIV. will supplement the following brief description of the Lateran cloister. The four sides of the quadrangle are formed of round arches supported on coupled marble shafts with single abaci and sub-bases but with separate capitals and bases. The shafts are of varied form, some simple, some twisted or in spirals, some inlaid with

<sup>1</sup> A note on my discovery was published last May in Comm. de Rossi's *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana* V. ii. 3-4.

exquisite colored glass and marble mosaics. The capitals are largely foliated and of the greatest variety of design, some approximating the classic Composite and Corinthian, others the pure Gothic forms, while quite a number are decorated with animals and human figures and heads. Every side is broken up into five bays, each consisting of five arcades; the bays are separated by heavy square piers, and each corresponds on the inside gallery to a cross-vault springing from stout Ionic columns. In the middle of the central bay on each side an opening is made in the high continuous basement on which all the columns rest, and these four doorways are flanked by a pair of lions or sphinxes. The outer marble decoration above the arcade is delicate and artistic—a rare combination of color and carving. The spandrel of each arch is filled with a decorative group in relief, reminding in its technique of antique stucco decoration. Above this is a frieze consisting of a narrow mosaic band ornamented by a cornice, while above it again is a far broader band with interlaced alternating circles and squares of mosaic surmounted by a heavy carved cornice resting on a close line of corbels. The rich carving of this cornice, with its spirited lion-head gargoyles, is equal to the best mediæval work. The *motif* of the decoration is repeated exactly in other contemporary works of the Roman school, such as the choir seats at Civita Castellana. The effect of this combination of architectural and plastic forms with the rich deep coloring of the mosaics, so harmoniously worked into every part, is unique.

It is not too much to say that this cloister before its mutilation must have been the most beautiful in existence. Its constructors have been known for some time. Comm. de Rossi brought to light a copy of the artist's signature,<sup>2</sup> and the inscription itself, which had been regarded as lost, was uncovered a few years ago in the course of a restoration.<sup>3</sup> It reads:

NOBILITER DOCTUS HAC VASSALECTUS IN ARTE  
CUM PATRE CEPIT OPUS QUOD SOLUS PERFICIT IPSE.

<sup>2</sup>*Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, 1875, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 1891, p. 90; *Bull. Arch. com.*, 1887, p. 99.

That is, Vassalectus began the work with his father and completed it alone, presumably after his father's death. It is known that an artist named Vassalectus executed an episcopal chair for the church of S. Andrea at Anagni in 1263, and I have already attempted to prove in this JOURNAL<sup>4</sup> that he executed the monument of Pope Hadrian V. in Viterbo in 1276. In the same paper I have given a list of this artist's works so far as known to me, and assigned to the cloister of S. John Lateran the date of 1220 to 1230 on account of its style. I was then inclined to regard one man as the author of all these works; at present I am disposed to assign the cloister to an earlier artist of the same name and family as the author of the Anagni throne. It is certain that there were three if not four artists of the same name and family, who practised the same branch of art from one generation to another from the middle of the twelfth until the second half of the thirteenth century. Their family name was variously spelled Bassalectus and Bassallectus in the earliest works (twelfth century), then Vassalectus, Vassallectus, Vassaletus, Vassalleto, Vasaletto, *etc.* This artistic family-school takes its place by the side of the others of a similar character in the Roman School, that are called, from the names of their founders, the Schools of Paulus, Ranuccius, and Laurentius.

Comm. de Rossi, who believes in the existence of four Vassaletti, attributes the cloister to the third artist and to the close of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century. Comm. Enrico Stevenson has attributed it to the first decades of the thirteenth century. The determination of its date is of especial interest for the history of the Roman school and its influence, for it is an epoch-making monument. This discovery I made accidentally, and it has confirmed my conjecture that the cloister was built between 1220 and 1230.

Cardinal Guala dei Bicchieri, Papal legate to the Albigenes, and not only the founder of the early Gothic church of S. Andrea at Vercelli, but apparently one of the promoters of the introduction of French Gothic architecture into

<sup>4</sup> *Notes on Roman Artists of the Middle Ages, III. Two Tombs of the Popes at Viterbo by Vassallectus and Petrus Oderise:* in *Am. Jour of Arch.*, Vol. VII. (1891), pp. 38-53.

Italy, died in 1230. He had made his will in 1227 in Rome, dating it at the basilica of S. Martino di Monti, *apud S. Martinum in Montibus*. Its text is published in Ughelli's Monumental work on the bishoprics of Italy (*Italia Sacra*, iv. p. 783), but seems to have attracted no attention, though it is interesting to the archæologist on account of the enumeration of works of art. I was struck by the following item: *Ad opus claustrī Lateranen., lib. 10 proven.* It is a laconic but important sentence. The cardinal leaves ten pounds of Provençal money as a contribution toward the construction of the Lateran cloister. The expression *ad opus* shows that in 1227, at the time of the will, the cloister was in course of erection. It had been begun; but how long before 1227? and, also, when was it finished? The fact that the clause had not been revoked before the cardinal's death shows that, in 1230, the construction of the cloister was still going on, though it was probably nearing its end. As to when it may have been begun, I shall attempt an answer before closing. The interest taken by Cardinal Guala in the cloister was natural enough. He was cardinal of S. Martino di Monti; was often in Rome on account of the important share which he took in the diplomatic policy of the Papacy, and his knowledge of architecture is proved by the inscription of S. Andrea at Vercelli, which states that the plan and general features of this purely French structure, in the early Gothic style, were furnished by him. He was for quite a while in France. In his well-known mission to the Albigensians he had twelve associates, all abbots of the Cistercian order, and his connection with the Cistercians, proved also by his relation to the neighboring monasteries of that order at Tiglieto and Locedio, made it natural that he should patronize the new architecture which was being spread by the Cistercians, from the monasteries of the order in Burgundy.<sup>6</sup>

It being established that the Lateran cloister was under way between 1227 and 1230, is it possible to determine approximately the date at which its construction was commenced? A comparative glance at the style of the mediæval cloisters in

<sup>6</sup> On this subject of the introduction of Gothic architecture into Italy by the Cistercians, see my article in the JOURNAL for 1890 and 1891.

Rome and its neighborhood may give a solution. The two examples that most closely resemble the Lateran cloister are those of the monastery at Sassovivo in Umbria, near Foligno, and of the basilica of S. Paul outside the walls at Rome. At Sassovivo the work is far simpler, probably for the sake of economy, the shafts being straight and smooth, without mosaic inlay: the profiles, the mouldings, the proportions, the outside members above the arcade are all well-nigh identical with the Lateran work. The only mosaic inlay is found in the narrow frieze above the arcades, the broader frieze being of plain marble slabs. The simplicity is no sign of an earlier date. The artist signed himself thus:

*Hoc claustris opus egregium, | Quod decorat monasterium | Donnus  
abbas Angelus precepit | Multo sumptu fieri et fecit | A magistro Petro  
de Maria | Romano opere et mastria | Anno Domini milleno | Iuncto ei  
bis centeno | Nono quoque cum viceno.*

This gives the date as 1229, the artist as Petrus de Maria, the style as Roman. . It is the only inscription which explicitly declares this style of work to be Roman, perhaps because this is the only cloister built in this style by an artist who was not a Roman or a member of the Roman School. Pietro di Maria was probably a native of Umbria. I believe that every detail of this work, every section of columns, cornices, mouldings, facings, capitals, and bases, was executed in Rome and transported to Sassovivo, and that a careful examination would show that every piece was so carefully numbered and marked as to make the setting up a merely mechanical process. This will be shown later to have been the case at Subiaco. This cloister of Sassovivo does not help as to the date of the Lateran cloister, except in so far as it shows that in 1229 the Roman style in such work was recognized. Consequently, as we must look for its prototype in Rome, and since, as will appear, this prototype can be only the Lateran cloister, it would seem also that in 1229 this cloister was so far toward completion as to serve as a model.

The cloister of S. Paul is in every respect of its construction and proportions the counterpart of that attached to the Lateran. It is true that except for one of the four sides, which is the later part and by the hand of a different artist,

this cloister is somewhat simpler in its columns and in the decoration of the spandrels of its arches ; but the greater simplicity does not extend to the other parts, such as the mosaic inlay, and appears to be no sign of an earlier date. In fact, the structure was begun under Abbot Pietro di Capua, at about the same time as the Lateran—I believe a few years later—but finished certainly later, under Abbot Giovanni di Ardea, who died in 1241. These two monuments, are, then, slightly younger contemporaries of the Lateran cloister. Are there any others that might dispute its claim—Sassovivo and S. Paul—to be the prototype of this style ?

During the twelfth century several cloisters were built in Rome. The most important of these are: (1) that of the church of the SS. Quattro Coronati ; (2) that of the basilica of S. Lorenzo outside the walls ; (3) that of the Cisterican monastery of SS. Vincenzo e Anastasio at the Tre Fontane ; (4) that of S. Cecilia. Of these four the second and third alone are well known. They have the typical simplicity and heaviness of primitive Romanesque: heavy cubic capitals ; plain shafts, usually single, seldom coupled, under the arches ; no mouldings or sculptured or mosaic decoration. The cloister of S. Cecilia is somewhat in advance ; its proportions are less heavy, and the stone-work more careful, but the simplicity remains unchanged ; while the two former structures were erected about the middle of the twelfth century, I would assign this to the second half well advanced. Apparently I am the first to call attention to this interesting cloister and I merely mention it at present, reserving its detailed study for a later occasion. The fourth Romanesque cloister, that of the SS. Quattro Coronati, I have neither seen nor studied in drawings or photographs, but I hear that it is in a good state of preservation and a gem of early work. It would be natural to assume that this cloister was erected when the church and monastery were rebuilt in 1112 by Pope Paschal II. (1099–1118) after being partly destroyed in the burning of the city by Robert Guiscard. In that case it is the earliest in Rome. The reason that the two latter monuments are inedited and nearly unknown is that they belong to nunneries and are, of course, not opened to men except by special permission from the cardinal titular of the church.

The second group of Roman cloisters was, I believe, erected during the first quarter of the thirteenth century; and their style approximates far more closely to that of the cloisters of S. John Lateran and S. Paul than to that of the examples of the twelfth century just cited. The proportions here become more elongated; the columns are in most cases not single but coupled under each arch; the faces of the arches begin to assume mouldings and to develop a frieze above them on the outside; the capitals no longer have the heavy cubic form, but become delicate and often bell-shaped, and begin at times to have a light foliated surface-decoration in a style analogous to the early Gothic foliated forms which were just then being introduced into the Roman Province by the French Cistercian monks from Burgundy, who were erecting monasteries throughout Italy. The principal examples of this style with which I am familiar are the following:

*S. Cosimato* in Trastevere. This cloister has been known only for little more than a year, since the restoration of the nunnery was begun in order to adapt it to the purposes of an asylum for aged and infirm men. Its arcades were swathed in a mass of masonry. They are now almost completely disengaged, and the cloister is shown to surpass in size all other Roman cloisters, not excepting that of S. Paul. The style is extremely uneven, and I could perceive what seemed to me two periods of construction, not, however, distant in date. The workmanship in general is extremely careless and inaccurate, the capitals often being cut entirely regardless of the size of the shafts. The capitals are transitional from the perfectly plain-surfaced cubic form to the foliated, the greater part belonging to the former, and a few to the latter class. This edifice appears to me to be the earliest of the second group of Roman cloisters, in so far as I am acquainted with them.

*S. Scolastica* at Subiaco. This cloister shares with that of Sassovivo the palm of beauty among the cloisters built by the Roman artists outside of the Eternal City. Subiaco was a favorite center for the artists of the family of Laurentius.\*

\* For further information and a reference to sources regarding this family of artists see my paper in vol. v., pp. 182-88 of this JOURNAL. The following is the usually accepted genealogical tree of the family school of the artist Laurentius—

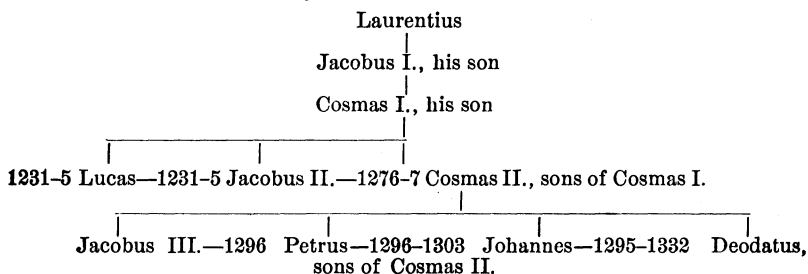


At the upper monastery—the *Sacro Speco*—Laurentius himself worked with his son Jacobus shortly after the middle of the twelfth century, as is shown by an inscription. Then Jacobus began, some years after—probably in about 1210—the cloister at *S. Scolastica*, the other and principal Benedictine monastery at Subiaco. He finished and signed only one side of it. After his death, probably, the work was taken up by his son Cosmas together with his grandsons Lucas and Jacobus II. The three sides executed by these three artists, though apparently contemporary with the Lateran cloister, are somewhat inferior to the work of their progenitor Jacobus, being less accurate and happily proportioned. The old side has each stone carefully numbered or marked, and this proves, I believe, that every detail was executed in the family workshop in Rome and then shipped to Subiaco, so marked that each piece could be put into its place by the merest tyro. I verified such marks on every block and member belonging to the original work. This system of marking does not appear in the other three sides. The inferior quality of the later work may be partly explained by the fact that Cosmas and his sons were obliged to adhere to the original scheme of the earlier artist and were hampered by this necessity, at a time when their original work was in a more advanced style.

*S. Sisto* on the *Via Appia*. After Pope Honorius had confirmed in 1216 the order of *S. Dominick* he gave him the church of *S. Sisto*, and the site became famous for the miracle which it is believed he performed there of bringing back to

who were architects, sculptors, and mosaicists. I do not endorse every detail of this tree, and would suggest some changes in it if this were the place.

*School of Laurentius: c. 1150-1332*



life the young nephew of the cardinal of Fossanova. When the Dominican monks were transferred to S. Sabina, the establishment was handed over to the Dominican nuns, in 1219. It can hardly be doubted that to these years, that is, from 1216 to about 1220, belong both the chapel of S. Dominick and the part of one side which is all that remains of the primitive cloister. The style of this fragment resembles in its simplicity the work at S. Tommaso in Formis, S. Sabina, S. Scolastica, and other so-called "Cosmati" works of the first two or three decades of this century.

*S. Sabina* on the Aventine. This was the first important establishment of the Dominicans in Rome and its monastery, so far as we can judge from the cloister, the chapter house, and other parts, dates from the period of S. Dominick himself and antedates the year 1221. It is thought that he commenced to build here as early as 1216. The cloister with its 103 columns is the most beautiful of this group. The lightness of the coupled columns, the Gothic type of the foliated capitals, the arch-mouldings, and other details show the influence exercised upon the Roman artists by the Cistercians. If one were to add the mosaic decoration and the sculptured details and vary the forms of the colonnettes, the style of S. John Lateran would be attained.

The monuments forming this group may be arranged in the following order, and if I here give tentative dates it is mainly to express what I believe to be the relation of each to the other in point of time and their relation to preceding and succeeding monuments :

1. S. Cosimato in Trastevere, Rome, . . . . . 1200-1215
2. S. Scolastica, Subiaco (early part), . . . . . 1210-1215
- " " (later part), . . . . . 1215-1235
3. S. Sisto, Rome, . . . . . 1216-1221
4. S. Sabina, Rome, . . . . . 1217-1225

The work at S. Cosimato is tentative, and shows an art not sure of itself: it might be placed even a few years earlier than the date mentioned. The two dates given to S. Scolastica apply, the first to the one side built by Jacobus, the second to the other three sides executed by Cosmas and his two sons. I believe the following conclusions may be drawn, without carrying more into details this glance at the monument.

1. During the course of the twelfth century cloisters were built in Rome in a severe and heavy style that cannot serve as the prototype of the works of the thirteenth century, which were not a development from them but very largely a new creation.

2. During the years between 1200 and 1220 or thereabout, there were constructed in Rome cloisters of far greater elegance and slenderness, tending in their proportions, capitals, and other details toward the Gothic idea, and preparing the way for the more fully developed, and artistically more perfect type represented by S. John Lateran and S. Paul.

3. The Lateran cloister appears to have been the first example of the use of stucco-like marble reliefs, of mosaic frieze and mosaic inlay in the columns, and to have also made popular the use of twisted and otherwise varied shafts. All these characteristics it combined with the general forms developed in the best examples of the preceding group.

4. The Lateran cloister was commenced not before 1221, probably between the years 1222 and 1226, and served as a type for other works. In 1230 it was still in course of construction, but was probably finished soon after.

5. It is not a fact susceptible as yet of exact proof, but it is a probable inference, both on artistic and on quasi-chronological grounds, that the cloister of S. Paul was a few years later than that of the Lateran; and that even were it begun at about the same time, it was finished nearly a decade later.

6. It is probable that we should attribute to Vassalectus III. and his father the introduction into cloistral architecture of the mosaic decoration so beautifully characteristic of its style; transferring it perhaps from the church porches on which it had been used for over a half century.

It would be interesting to compare these Roman cloisters with other contemporary cloisters in order to trace reciprocal influences, for one is apt to go astray by keeping within too narrow a field of vision and thus failing to recognize important factors in development. There are the two beautiful examples at Fossanova<sup>7</sup> and at Monreale in Sicily<sup>8</sup> with their

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of Arch.* 1890, pl. V. Its date is 1200-1210.

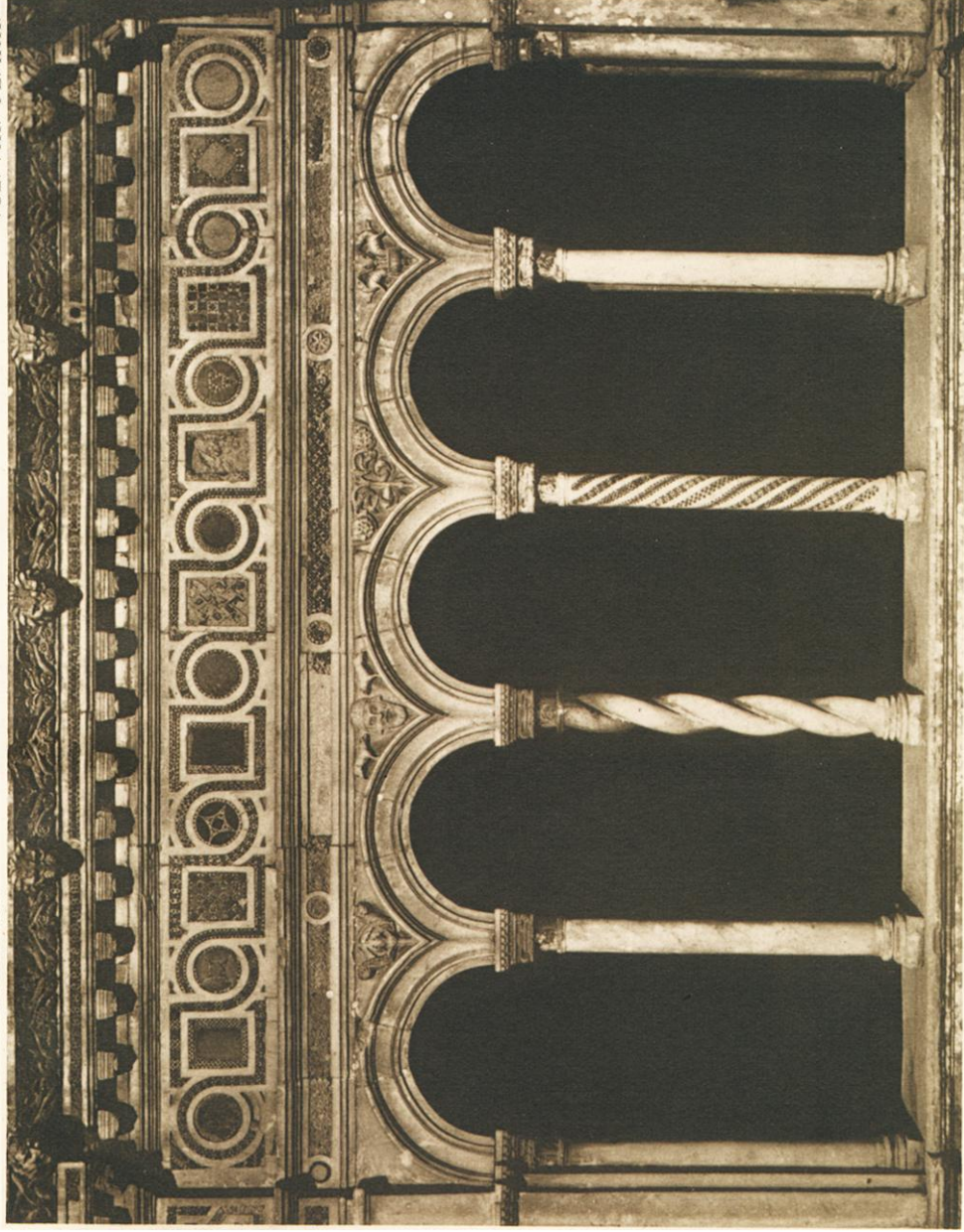
<sup>8</sup> GRAVINA, *Il Duomo di Monreale* and other works. Its date is before 1200.

wonderful treatment of variegated shafts ; there are such Cistercian cloisters as those of S. Maria di Gradi at Viterbo and one in France, both exhibiting the interesting fact of the identity of works by the same order in two different countries and bearing in their shafts a striking resemblance to the Roman cloisters of the beginning of the thirteenth century. Such comparisons, however, would be out of place in any but a detailed study with accompanying illustrations.

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S. JOHN LATERAN, ROME. BAY OF CLOISTER.